

The Secondary Benefits of the Prayer Book.

24
A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE

BISHOP WHITE PRAYER BOOK SOCIETY,

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IN ST. LUKE'S CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA.

BY THE

RIGHT REV. GEORGE BURGESS, D. D.,

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S E R M O N .

“ Now, therefore, write ye this song for you : and teach it to the children of Israel : put it in their mouths.”—DEUTERONOMY, xxxi. 19.

To cause a whole people to commit to memory a form of prophetic words was one divine mode of transmitting instruction and warning from generation to generation. This song of Moses was thus to go down as a commemoration of the mercies of the God of Israel when He led His people through the wilderness ; and as an admonition of the doom which hung threatening over their distant future, if they should ever despise His covenant.

The process of teaching, of learning, of retaining, and of restoring any matter once brought into a literary form, became more easy as the arts of writing, of reading, of engraving, and at length of printing, were successively made common ; but the faithful memory is, after all, the best reliance, not for the accurate preservation of historical facts, for oral tradition is proverbially uncertain, but for the universal circulation, maintenance, and influence of grand truths and sentiments embalmed in the form of fitly chosen language. It is the words that cling, through their hold upon the ear, and their constant, unwearied utterance. They bind the imagination, that dangerous foe to mere correctness of narrative.

They insure distinctness and precision of thought in proportion to the skill with which they are selected and arranged, and to the importance of that which they express. If that be sacred, and if the words be either given by inspiration or moulded with exquisite care and consummate ability, if these be then both written out and preserved in records, and also committed generally to memory, and taught from age to age, and recited daily, weekly, or even yearly, it is hard to conceive an instrumentality so powerful for the instruction of a people, of a church, or of all mankind.

It was thus, whether with deliberate design or merely from that natural necessity which reduces a variety of modes of expression of the same thing, in very similar words, to a single type at last; it was thus that the Apostles' Creed became a fixed declaration of the faith of the Gospel; and thus, also, that when, by consultation, the Nicene Creed was settled to a letter, it remained also in the mouths of all Christendom through all later centuries. When, before, the Lord complied with the request that He would teach His disciples to pray, as John had taught his disciples, He, too, must have intended the purposes which the universal and constant repetition of His prayer has since accomplished in every land, congregation, and family.

The charge, "when we pray, to say" the Lord's Prayer, if not a command enjoining any forms of prayer beyond that one, was yet much more than a permission, and not less, at least, than a recommendation of liturgical services. How universal or exclusive they were at first is amongst the many obscurities of early Christian history; but they were, and must be, in one degree or another, a necessity for a united communion. You may limit this element, if you will, to hymns, doxol-

ogies, sacramental formulas, and well-established general uses of scriptural phrases with a special import. But, so far, even these are a liturgical service, and they constitute exactly the firmest and most precious portion of those religious customs which seem most to shrink from alliance with the forms of a fixed ritual. The *Gloria Patri*, sung in so many Christian congregations of every name, more effectually teaches the faith of the Holy Trinity than could any number of sermons. But if such be the natural and necessary power of a single form, it cannot but be that a book which shall include the language of all the offices employed in public prayer, and in the administration of every ordinance, from baptism to burial, and which shall be in all hands and under all eyes, from day to day, from Sunday to Sunday, from year to year, continually heard, read, learned, and repeated, must wield, beyond the most direct and highest purpose of each occasion, an incalculable, though indirect influence over those to whom it thus becomes more than "household words."

These more indirect uses of the Book of Common Prayer I propose now to consider, in five principal results: doctrinal instruction; private habits of devotion; correctness of Christian feeling; maintenance of the religion of families and neighborhoods which lack the ordinary privileges of public worship; and assistance in preserving unity amongst believers.

The Book of Common Prayer, as including the Creeds, the Articles, and the Catechism, is a manual of direct and positive instruction in Christian doctrine. Of this we speak not now; but of the effect on the mind, of listening, from youth upward, to a system of forms, built upon one clear, uniform foundation of

Apostolic truth. It is not possible that this should fail to create a strong and, to some extent, an intelligent impression of that truth; intelligent in proportion to the general intelligence of the mind by which it is received, but always strong and enduring. Wonderfully is this aided by the necessity of hearing, also, such large portions of the Scriptures read with distinctness and solemnity in the house of God, and in their due order, from season to season. I am not afraid to express the opinion that the result is apparent in a clearer perception of the Gospel as a whole, amongst the members of our communion, all other things being equal, than elsewhere.

They may often be less informed on one or another topic of grave discussion. They may be, in many instances, less prepared to defend that which they believe—less accustomed to the weapons of argument. They may not seldom be unlearned and ignorant people, without the riches of mental cultivation. They will, probably, know less than any class of sectarians respecting the particular support which each sect is accustomed to draw from the Scriptures for its own peculiarities. They may be far below many other individuals in religious experience, devout fervor, and personal holiness. But so far as, in any of these things, they are equal to those with whom they are compared, they will be distinguished beyond them by their right, simple, balanced, and unexaggerated conceptions of the law and Gospel of God.

It is not where the Book of Common Prayer furnishes utterance to all hearts, that the minister looks round upon his congregation and knows that, in pew after pew, his plainest and most fundamental statements of scriptural truth will be arraigned as if before a hos-

tile or perfectly indifferent and independent tribunal. It is not among honest pupils of that Book, whether more or less informed, that wild errors and bold doubts have their first subtle sources. Not there do men learn to question the mediation and atonement of the incarnate Son. It is not there that the authority of the Old Testament is assailed, or that any one of the great truths of redemption comes by disuse to be quite overlooked, and then viewed as dubious. Not there spring up the controversies which proceed from the partial, but habitual exaltation of one doctrine above the rest by which it is surrounded and sustained in its just place and proportion. Not there are we accustomed to encounter that mental fanaticism which pushes a precious truth till it becomes a baleful falsehood. Oh, how much do we and our children owe to this blessed order in which the doctrines of the Word of God shine constantly upon us, like the stars in their courses, each from the path which was traced for it by His finger; and this kindly influence which comes down as steadfastly and as refreshingly as the nightly dews! Or what could avail so much to counteract the danger of falling into popular errors of every kind as to bring this Book to the knowledge of all worshippers, of every sect and name!

The very habit of seeing something which we revere as clothed with authority, of listening to the voice of the collective Church, of uttering with our own lips the confessions of ancient ages and of universal Christendom, imparts firmness to faith, and checks the speculative fancy. If the Church of England has been, indeed, the bulwark of the truth in times when infidelity flooded France, and reached to the very altars in Germany, and corrupted the rank, the political wisdom,

and the learning of every European country, it has been largely because the English people, in the hall and in the cottage alike, taught by the Liturgy, knew by habit, as if it had been by instinct, how to distinguish between that truth and every plausible or repulsive disguise. Whatever power our Church, in this land, can exercise, in the same blessed cause, beyond the proportion of our numbers and our intellectual wealth, is due, also, in great part, to this continual training. It is not merely strength of conviction which is thus created—for that is sometimes attended by a rigid and uninviting bigotry—but it is a tranquil and harmonious union of the various points of truth, just as they appear in the Prayer Book itself, so that faith, being at rest, can also be charitable and comprehensive. May God extend and maintain by His grace, throughout our land, the doctrine taught by that book, even as there it is taught! And when you send out a single copy to some distant village or some lonely habitation, be assured you are giving the very best guide to the right exposition and arrangement, in all common minds, of the great doctrines of salvation. How priceless the treasure of a belief, thus grounded and settled by the prayers of years, like a ship that lies anchored close under the shelter of our native cliffs!

A second indirect use of the Book of Common Prayer is in the increase and guidance of the habits of private devotion. Have we any probable conception what multitudes unlearn the custom of praying regularly at all, as soon as they emerge from childhood, partly for want of forms beyond the few simple words which they learned at their mothers' knees? Blame them, condemn them; be grateful to God if it never was your own con-

dition; be grateful if, having once lived thus without God, you have been delivered by His grace; but think how inestimable a mercy it is to have from childhood upward the words of the Common Prayer in the ears and in the recollection! Tell us not that special gifts of the Spirit will enable every young, ignorant, heavy, or guilty mind, at once to think of all which should be asked, to arrange petitions in due order, and to pour them forth in fitting words before the throne of mercy. Let our hearts, let our own closets, testify, even after long experience and every assistance. Devotion, at every age, in all circumstances, needs all the aids which piety and wisdom can furnish; and happy and forever blessed shall he be who shall be enabled to prepare for the prayers of the secret chamber such a manual—full, sober, fervent, measured, flowing, and heavenly—as shall match in its tone, spirit, and substance, this book of our sanctuaries. Till then, this book will itself direct many a struggling heart in its first endeavors, and shed a golden light to the last over the private communion of the aged saint with his Lord. You know not with what eagerness it is explored by those who, for the first time, light upon its pages. It is studied on Sundays where no church bell is heard; and is taken down from the shelf to be to the sick their only spiritual guide where they never hear the steps of a pastor. I speak that which, in single instances, I do know; and I might go further, and testify of pious men, in pastoral stations, who, coming into possession of this book, have found their long, unconscious aspirations satisfied, and made it, thenceforth, the companion and suggester of their devotions. Let every one of us judge of its worth for the chambers of others, by its value in our own; and when, with enfeebled, wandering, or troubled

minds, we long to pray, and scarcely can compose and collect our thoughts, so as even to follow the calmest and kindest guidance, and at length cast ourselves upon the words of the Common Prayer, and feel ourselves borne on as if upon the very breast of that river whose streams make glad the city of our God, then shall we rejoice to think how trifling an effort, how little beyond the mere wish, can place this volume where some one, even more helpless, can draw from it the same aid and joy.

As a rule, pattern, and mould of Christian feeling the Prayer Book is too little prized even where it is otherwise held in cordial honor. There is a supposition, not often, if ever, expressed, but which, were it uttered, might be clothed in language like this: "The Prayer Book has been framed to speak the devotion of a whole people: its tone, therefore, must be suited to the lowest piety as well as to the highest it could not be so framed as to speak the most fervent tones of spiritual minds, or to carry on the heart of him who prays in secret from step to step of his advancing life in Christ, or to give the fittest words to the supplications of a few pious friends who meet for nearer communion with God and with one another." There comes thus to be an impression that though liturgical language be most worthy of the sanctuary, from its well-ordered majesty, yet it is less tender, less personal, and less inward than the extemporary utterances of the circle or the closet. But such an impression would be at variance with all the facts of the ripest Christian experience. Shall I remind you how the dying Hammond, in his utmost pains, "composed," as his biographer says, "the irregular and ejaculatory devotion" of his friends by saying, "Let us call

on God in the voice of His Church!" Shall I add how the dying Herbert, when he was asked what prayers should be offered in his chamber, answered, "Oh, sir, the prayers of my mother, the Church of England; there are no prayers like them!" Shall I record the testimony of Hannah More, that never, in the most rapturous moments of the saintliest minds, have they failed to find in these prayers their most soaring and sustaining wings? They fulfil, in their place, the very office which is characteristic, in a still higher degree, of the prayer of our Lord. That is not the prayer which springs to the lips of men in the moments of even devotional enthusiasm. It is not impassioned: it is calm, though full, and easily intelligible, though inexhaustibly profound. It breathes into all our prayers its spirit of boundless adoration, of large charity, of filial trust, of sublime simplicity, and of practical earnestness; and that it has been so widely discarded from public and private use amongst many Christians is, perhaps, the saddest proof of some conscious variance from its standard of devout feeling. I apprehend, my brethren, that we are all sensible of such a variance, not only in many unpremeditated prayers to which we may listen, but also in many of the books of private devotion which come to us from sources most highly honored in the Church, such as Kenn, and Taylor, and Thomas à Kempis. They are attuned to a strain which we cannot always nor everywhere follow. They seem often exaggerated, either rising

"too high
For sinful man beneath the sky,"

or sinking into tones of such self-aborrence as far exceeds the common utterance of the severest repent-

ance. The thoughtful and conscientious, in employing such forms, are continually obliged to curtail and modify, that they may be honest with themselves and reach the standard of the Scriptures and of the Liturgy. For here the Liturgy is all scriptural; and no pious heart feels any such conflict between its own convictions and the words into which they are taught to flow. The Liturgy, without being itself the language of all prayer, may yet impress on all other prayers so much of its phrases, its substance, and its spirit, that the happiest path shall be preserved between unrestrained and merely human fervidness, and cold, general, and unevangelical aspiration. It teaches men to pray, and so teaches them to feel; and if the whole majestic scheme of revelation, the attributes and government of God, the sinfulness of men, the terrors of the law, the saving work of Christ, the riches of grace, the excellence of truth and love, the compass of all duty, and the glories of the kingdom that is to come, are all in their just place in this book, then must the frequent recurrence of each, in words so primitive and impressive, assist mightily to form the whole soul to the harmonious circle of right and pure affections toward God and man.

It is largely a question for personal experience; but which of us is not grateful for the influence of these services on our inmost hearts? which of us believes that any teachers, or all teachers, through sermons, devotional exercises, or private intercourse, could lend such aid, so balanced, so powerful, so holy? Even now, narrow as is the sphere within which it is the recognized rule of public prayer, yet from ourselves its influence extends far over the customs and the very feelings of those in other Christian bodies whose intelligence and piety most enlighten their brethren. But could it be intro-

duced within every home, even though not enthroned in every house of prayer, blessed, indeed, for the whole religion of our nation, would be its silent working in subduing all which is proud or irreverent, in restraining all which is rash or excessive, and in forming the views more after the very image, not of the more imperfect among good guides, but of the apostles and martyrs, and of Christ Jesus.

For the maintenance of religion in families and neighborhoods, apart from the ordinary means of public worship, the Prayer Book may be compared with a mine which has been forgotten and deserted. We know, indeed, what it was in that wonderful community that grew up in the midst of the sea, from the relics of a band of mutineers; the little society of Pitcairn's Island. We have heard of its use and preserving power on the wild and lonely coasts of Newfoundland. It has gone, too, with many a settler from Connecticut or Western New York, to be the Sunday light of his far home in Ohio or Illinois, till a village grew up where the log house had been, and some pioneer bishop came to grasp the hand of the veteran lay-reader. Unconsciously and unintentionally, the fathers of New England entailed on many of their descendants a terrible evil, while they left the Book of Common Prayer behind them in their parent land, and tried to become ignorant of its well-known contents. They may not have foreseen the time when the village life of their native country, and the comparative compactness in which the dread of savage foes compelled them here to dwell, would give place before the expansive emigration of a great people, and the habitations of men would be scattered, here one, and there three or four—all over many a

region of forests, or prairies, or mountains. How could the forms, how could the fact of worship be maintained, where there could be no minister, no place of public prayer, and no congregation? It could have been by the liturgical services; and I know not how else, unless each head of a family were supposed to be endowed with wisdom as well as with grace, beyond the common height even of consistent piety. How else could the voice of just and appropriate praise and supplication be heard in each little neighborhood or solitary dwelling? Long since has the day arrived when multitudes were cast beyond all pastoral care or effort. The transient errand of the colporteur has been, though a relief in necessity, yet a very slight substitute. Itinerant ministrations are unfrequent, meagre, and all but ineffectual. That which can alone provide myriads of households with Sunday worship, or daily worship, that shall be solemn, instructive, and interesting, is the Holy Bible, and along with it some book, if other book there were, resembling the Common Prayer. The Common Prayer is indeed the only book; and yet it is almost as effectually shut out from these households as if it were in an unknown tongue, or beyond the seas. Few of the more intelligent inhabitants of this land, beyond our own communion, have even the slightest knowledge of its contents, or have a copy in their possession. It has not entered into the dreams of that more scattered and less instructed portion who need it most for family and social use, and who, for want of its aid, wander as lost sheep in the wilderness. It may seem as if little were to be hoped from any attempt to introduce it there and now; and yet I would say, "Cast your bread upon the waters." Ten thousand Prayer Books, sent through the less populous regions of our country,

would not cost as much as the annual income of many individual members of our Church who are very far from the foremost rank of affluence; and yet hundreds of those books would probably be the light of life to the dwellings which they entered. It is in this sphere that this society might have such noble room for its activity or bounty. Do not ask too carefully what becomes of your Prayer Books. It is these wandering messengers that arrest the eye and heart of some youth whom they prepare for our communion and ministry. It is thus that many a family gains that preliminary and prepossessing acquaintance which prepares it to welcome the missionary, and blend itself with the parochial organization. It is even through these scattered books that not seldom does the distant or itinerant preacher feel himself drawn toward the Church whose voice has found him afar off, and taught him many of his best supplications. We love the accents of the Common Prayer, as they flow from the lips of priest or bishop, under the vaulted dome, amidst the echoing arches, caught up and poured back through the response of the kneeling multitude. But not less touching and elevating are they to the pious traveller, if they should reach his ear through the thin partition of some rude dwelling, or should be lifted up by a few neighbors keeping the Lord's Day in some extemporaneous "forest sanctuary," far away. Such scenes are indeed much more often dreamed than witnessed; but so are all developments of humble and intelligent piety in solitude; and let us not think that the capabilities of the Prayer Book are exhausted till they have been faithfully tried, and tried everywhere.

The last of its less direct uses, of which we have

now to speak, is in the preservation of unity amongst believers. That it powerfully tends and contributes to this blessed issue is proclaimed from within ourselves by the strong attachment of our hearts, each to each, and each to our common altars, when we seem most separate. It is attested by the evident closeness and firmness of the bonds which fasten all our Dioceses, remote and various as they are, into a body so largely harmonious; bonds certainly owing their first strength to the conviction of duty toward catholic unity and the apostolic ministry, but also endeared and made familiar by the habits of thinking, praying, and praising in the same words, wherever two or three of us are met together. They are not, indeed, proof against every shock; and we must not test them too severely. Once, the Common Prayer was the common inheritance of all men of English ancestry. The Puritan divine, who had known it by heart, learned not only not to love it, but sometimes to name it with disdain and abhorrence. Age after age, thousands have cast it by, and formed or joined other organizations, with other usages. The founder of Methodism honored the Liturgy, but he honored Methodism more; and if the Prayer Book was not wholly relinquished by his followers, yet it did not prevent a vast, and, so far, an irreconcilable division.

My brethren, it becomes us who gather around this standard of our faith and worship, to remember these things, and not to make even the Prayer Book our idol, or imagine that it will serve as a palladium of unity after we have welcomed the Trojan horse of discord within our walls. When we cease to love one another; when there is no mutual confidence; when we can no longer act under the same administration, or obey the same laws; when conscience, well or ill-informed, utters the

cry, "Come out, and be ye separate," in vain will the Prayer Book plead for unity; and, therefore, may the Spirit of all grace, the Spirit of truth, the God of peace, avert that day! Till then, the souls of those who pray together will be knit together; and often, when they may be tempted to go asunder, that book will draw them back, and say to them in their holiest moments, "Ye are brethren." If its forms of words be adequate to utter all which assemblies of Christian worshippers ought habitually to feel in their approaches to their Lord and Saviour, then I only need to be assured that they are sincerely employed, and I recognize the fullest assurance of the best communion. The faith of him who believes with that book, and the piety of him who prays and feels with that book, can never be questioned by others who likewise feel, and pray, and believe. This, at least, is common ground and holy ground; and it is a precious privilege, tending to union, not merely outward, but in the deepest sentiments of the Christian heart, that on all which this book contains we are as one man; and how much it contains, indeed! Is it not a mighty and a divine work to clasp together such great multitudes of believers, thus, and so far? Will not much more vigorous efforts than have yet been known amongst us, be well expended to bring the Common Prayer to its due place in all hands and hearts, even though there were no other end than this?

The more indirect uses of the Prayer Book have been our subject at this time: its grand, direct use, as it is the organ of the public devotion of the Church, has been often emblazoned, as it were, before you, and is a part of your experience to-day and to-night. Whatever blessings of either kind that volume bears on its wings, let them be sent abroad as well as brought to

us. No more amazing marvel has been developed in all that modern progress of science and of art which wisdom from above has made the channel of such happiness to men, than that the whole of the Holy Bible, from Moses to St. John, can be obtained at the cost of half a laborer's daily toil; and that the residue of the day would furnish his family with Prayer Books. To scatter these gratuitously is, therefore, not always either needful or wise, where they are already revered; but to place them where they may be found by those who will not seek them, is, if not the noblest nor the hardest, yet one of the most faithful of all the offices of Christian love. If ever our Church is even to be known to the masses in our land, there must be a large free circulation amongst them of that book through which alone it can be known. There, in that little space, at a thousandth part of the salary of a preacher, and with the substance and the power of ten thousand tracts, is the Gospel not only proclaimed, but taught, professed, prayed, lived, if we but will, in communion with the piety of all the former ages. As you value it, so bestow it; sparingly or bountifully, according as it blesses yourselves.